Tinnitus

Gregory Luce, MA

Occasionally it sounds like a cathedral tower full of bells but usually it’s more like the last scatter of cicadas at the end of summer, an almost pleasant buzz and whirr, though with a slightly higher pitch, as at night once the light has gone and daytime noise has faded. Crescendos rise then fall in soft waves and reverberate like the keening voices in Ligeti’s Lux Aeterna lift and drop, pierce and penetrate, throb and smooth and finally come to rest.

Editor’s Note

Beautiful Noise

Rafael Campo, MA, MD

Poetry has long drawn on the noisiness of the human body to make music from language. It’s not difficult to imagine that the impulse to create poetry with meter, perhaps the most audibly “musical” of poetic forms, originates with the heartbeat itself, the unstressed-stressed S1-S2 or “lub-DUB” syllabic (iambic) pattern that defines some of the greatest works of English poetry (Shakespeare’s sonnets, eg, “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”) and that is unconsciously common in everyday conversation (eg, “A cup of coffee and a slice of toast”). While the poem “Tinnitus” refers to a sensation of sound others can’t hear, the poem’s speaker gives us a compelling sense of it, first in the contour of the right margin of the poem, which illustrates the poem’s reference to crescendo and decrescendo, and then in its imagery—the “scatter of cicadas” (itself 3 iambics) with its “buzz and whirr” for example. The speaker then underscores the poetry-music connection with reference to the polyphonic choral composition Lux Aeterna by experimental Hungarian composer György Ligeti, famous for what aficionados have dubbed “tone poems.” Among many techniques, the worshipful piece has every singer voicing interval notes within dissonant chords at the same time, an exalted echo of the speakers’ internal “cathedral bells.” Thus we are reminded that even the most humble and annoying of tones can become transcendent, and that poetry, like the body, can be a miraculous symphony.

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Additional Information: The article online contains a link to a performance of Lux Aeterna.